

Teaching Oral English as a Second Language

Learning a new language

Almost half of the students in the Northern Territory come from non-English or limited English-speaking backgrounds and speak languages other than English. These students have already developed their own oral language skills but in learning another language, English, they are involved in additional tasks. Klein (1986) identifies four major tasks in learning a new language.

Analysis

The learner tries to make sense out of a stream of sounds, and gradually learns to analyse and comprehend speech by formulating hypotheses, testing them and drawing conclusions. It is typical for 'overgeneralisations' to occur. For example, young children learning English frequently generalise that '-ed' is the marker for all forms of the past tense in English and use forms such as 'I goed'.

Synthesis

The learner tries to put together words from a limited vocabulary in the second language to engage in communication. Communication becomes more effective as students increase the range of vocabulary and develop knowledge of the rules of syntax for language generation.

Embedding

Often utterances are embedded in copious contextual information. Even teachers embed their instructions or explanations in a mass of classroom contextual information, such as additional comments, reprimands for behaviour, interruptions, change of question or instruction forms. Effective communication depends on a balance of both explicit speech associated with tasks and contextual information.

Matching

Sometimes language acquisition is halted simply because the learners are unaware of any discrepancies in matching their language use with the target variety. Generally this occurs in the intermediate and advanced stages of second language learning if two languages are fairly similar or when students believe they are proficient despite discrepancies. At this stage some students appear to fossilise their language use. Second language learners need to continuously compare their current language use with the target variety and can be introduced to ways of monitoring their own progress.

As well as these tasks of analysing, synthesising, embedding and matching, there are identified specific tasks for second language learners which include the acquisition of the following

- a new set of sounds and sound groupings, which may or may not be like those in the first language

- new intonation patterns and their meanings, and new patterns of stress and pause, which are rarely available in written form
- a new script or alphabet
- a new set of sound–symbol relationships and spelling
- new vocabulary
- new ways of putting words together—a new grammar—and organising information and communication in both speech and writing
- new nonverbal signals, and new meanings for old nonverbal signals
- new social signals and new ways of getting things done through language
- new rules about the appropriateness of language for specific situations and roles
- new sets of culturally specific knowledge, values, behaviour
- a new culturally specific view of the world
- an ability to relate to people and to express feelings and emotions in the new language.

Approaches to support students learning English as a second or further language / dialect

Second language learners of English have already experienced collaborative interactions with adults during the development of their first language, and have developed a range of learning strategies to seek and create meaning. However teachers need to be aware of the importance of some additional approaches

- focusing on communicating meaning when using new vocabulary
- using concrete and pictorial visual aids, and if possible, direct experiences, when teaching concepts
- providing opportunities for repetition of English words and sentences through a variety of activities—games, songs, role-plays, drama, poems, retelling activities
- paying attention to the sounds and intonation patterns of English
- using modelling and scaffolding techniques
- providing learning sequences such as
 - wholes to parts to wholes
 - known to unknown
 - general to specific, specific to general
 - concrete to abstract
- providing opportunities for students to take risks and use their new language creatively—creative construction
- explaining culturally specific knowledge, social signals, and the appropriateness of language
- providing opportunities for students to extend their range of learning strategies
- allowing time, whenever possible, for students to internalise, respond to and try out English.

Scaffolding language learning

A 'scaffold' is a temporary framework used as a support to enable building erection, alteration or repair. The metaphor of 'scaffolding' learning—originally coined by Jerome Bruner, building on the ideas of Lev Vygotsky—refers to the teaching strategies and cognitive supports that model, guide and cue cognitive learning, as students move from 'what they already know and can do' to 'what they are ready to know and be able to do next with support', in the *zone off proximal development* as Vygotsky called it.

Scaffolding learning is much more than 'encouragement', 'management' or 'confirmation' of learning. Scaffolding language learning is happening when teachers

- make explicit
 - the dimensions of a learning task so that the student is clear exactly what has to be done and why
 - *how* it can be approached: breaking the task into steps and sequencing them towards the intended goal
 - the language and thinking skills involved in its achievement, including both explaining and modelling the structures and language features—including vocabulary—involved
- actively monitor students' progress and provide focused feedback which enables the student to evaluate their own performance—the processes and strategies they are using and their language use—and so to be able to take responsibility for their learning
- create a supportive environment within which students are confident to take risks and are supported by ready access to the help they need in order to learn.

Walking Talking Steps, the ESL program developed to support the teaching of Indigenous children in the Early Years, using the Petal Planner, suggests specifically how to scaffold ESL learners English language learning.

When a student is having a go at speaking in English the teacher can assist by

- expecting the student to supply whatever English he or she is able to, within the context of that activity
- building onto the words given by the students by rephrasing in more complete English what the student has said
- supplying words and English language structures which the students are not able to give, at the point at which they need to use the English
- encouraging and expecting the student to use the rephrased language either to restate what she/he said or to use later in the same context.